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A Pleasant Seat at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Macbeth

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Directed by Polly Findley
The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK
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Review by MARCIA EPPICH-HARRIS

Figure 1: Macbeth (Christopher Eccleston) in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of *Macbeth*. Photo by Richard Davenport, courtesy of the RSC.

I purchased tickets to see the 2018 RSC *Macbeth,* starring Christopher Eccleston and Niamh Cusack, five months in advance. At that point, both the Stalls and the Circle sections were sold out. The Upper Circle would have to do. While it is unsurprising that a former Doctor Who would pack the seats at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, I was still disappointed that I would be sitting so far away from the stage. However, in "foul-is-fair" fashion, the Upper Circle turned out to be *the place* to experience the hair-raising atmosphere of director Polly Findley's version of the Scottish play. Only from this vantage point could all elements of the play be properly viewed in relation to one another.

At opening, three young girls, no older than ten, sat on the Royal Shakespeare Stage, wearing identical hooded, pink pajamas with a pattern of small red, white, and pink hearts dotted on them, along with white boots. The girls wore

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their hoods up and played with dirty baby dolls. Center stage was a bed in which an older man slept, while a young woman, his attendant, it seemed, sat with him. In the background, brick walls flanked either side of a white-curtained backdrop with chairs against the walls on both sides. A man sat stage right and a woman sat stage left, as if in a waiting room, with a water cooler on the stage right side. The floor, carpeted royal blue, was framed with a black ledge that connected to the actors' exits through the audience. Overlooking all of this was a balcony,[1] creating a second level of action. It turned out that the girls were *Macbeth's* infamous witches,[2] the man in bed was King Duncan (David Acton), and the woman tending to him was Donalbain (Donna Banya), who, in this production, was not the King's son, but his niece. The man in the waiting room was the Porter (Michael Hodgson), who was on stage throughout the entire play, and the stage-left woman was Lady Macbeth (Niamh Cusack).

I go into this amount of detail in order to stress how important it was to this production to be able to see all of these elements at once and in context with each other. The comprehensive scene being performed at any one time created a mimetic rendering of "the present horror" of the play. It is tempting to call the production cinematic because of its debts to film, such as the utter creepiness of the "innocent" witches that recall horror film classics such as *The Shining* or *The Omen*; however, when the witches started the play with "When shall we three meet again / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" it was important to note that the Porter, especially, was watching them, as was Lady Macbeth, and that the evil about to be perpetrated against the *truly* innocent, feeble King center stage was something with which these watching characters were complicit. Effects such as fog and lightning added to the atmosphere throughout the play and set the tone early on. This was going to be a scary play.

And it was. Of course, Shakespeare's witches have been depicted in a number of ways, from spooky to sexy, as have the other supernatural features. Yet *Macbeth* always presents itself as far more philosophical than the typical slasher flick. Findley's version, along with lighting design by Lizzie Powell, sound design by Christopher Shutt, and illusion design by Chris Fisher and Neil Henry, made the play like a Stephen King thriller with much higher quality language. This is not to say I didn't like it. In fact, I loved it – so much so that I dared to call it a definitive *Macbeth* when discussing it with my play-going companions. The problem I later realized was: if you didn't already know *Macbeth* pretty well, you might have a hard time understanding *just how fascinating* this production really was and what good use it made of both theatre space and actor doubling, not to mention late-20th century technology, and thematic and choreographic precision. Themes of the play framed the action through the use of projected quotes at various times during the show. After the witches' first scene, white block letters appeared above the balcony, "WHEN THE BATTLE'S LOST AND WON," and the action continued with soldiers waking Duncan as they entered the scene. Donalbain rushed forward with a wheelchair, illustrating the state of the King's health. While the "bloody man" spoke, the three little witches appeared in the balcony above, a thin fog menacing the air about them. Their presence overlooking Duncan's court was chilling. This production never allowed the

audience to forget the witches' existence or their influence. They acted as stagehands – maneuvering set pieces to parallel their manipulation of Macbeth – which allowed the witches multiple opportunities to unsettle the audience.

When Eccleston's Macbeth entered for his first scene, he carried a bloody, unsheathed sword, and wore a modern soldier's uniform similar to those of the men in the previous scene. He sported a salt-and-pepper beard, which made Eccleston look older than he typically does in his television roles, and perhaps more serious. Using his natural accent, Eccleston portrayed a northern, but not quite Scottish, Macbeth, whose unpretentious delivery made the exalted soldier ironically down to earth. When approached by the witches, Eccleston's fear felt authentic. The girls giggled at him and Banquo (Raphael Sowole) before delivering their "wyrd" prophecies. What impressed me the most about Eccleston's performance was how charismatic and natural he was in the role. Eccleston's co-star, Niamh Cusack, commented in an interview that Eccleston, "speaks the verse like he's making it up as he's going along. It just sounds so natural."[3] I couldn't agree more.

Figure 2: Macbeth (Christopher Eccleston) and Lady Macbeth (Niamh Cusack) in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of Macbeth. Photo by Richard Davenport, courtesy of the RSC.

Eccleston's chemistry with Cusack created an impeccable pairing that illustrated the complementarity of two people in a long-term relationship perfectly. Findlay rearranged 1.4 and 1.5 in order to use a flashback reminiscent of film, splitting Lady Macbeth's first scene into two parts, with Cusack's first long monologue divided so that the scene cut to the court at the end of Macbeth's letter. The flashback quality was a nice touch – *showing* the audience what Lady Macbeth has been told – in addition to adding beautiful interpretive moments. Duncan, in a wheelchair, shook hands with Macbeth, then wiped his hand with a cloth, as if somewhat disgusted. Yet when Banquo entered, Duncan made the effort to rise from his wheelchair and embrace him. The difference was striking. When Duncan established

Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland, Eccleston's Macbeth anticipated that *he* not Malcolm would be named, and Eccleston took a few hesitant steps toward Duncan as the King proclaimed, "We will establish our state upon –" (holding the "upon" for effect) and then "... Our eldest, Malcolm." Macbeth's disappointment and embarrassment were palpable in Eccleston's reaction. Eccleston mentioned in an interview that he identified more with Macbeth's somewhat more proletarian background as a soldier than other leading Shakespeare roles he'd played, like Hamlet, "There are definitely things I can access [in playing Macbeth] – about being very capable, but being overlooked."[4]

After Macbeth's hopes were dashed, the scene cut back to Lady Macbeth, starting with the lines, "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised," so that her own scheming could bookend Macbeth's letdown. This cut made so much sense that I wondered why I had never seen it before in a live production. When Macbeth entered, anxious, but relieved to be with his wife, he seemed too naively confident in her opinion of him to imagine that she had just defamed him to the audience, saying he was "too full o' the milk of human kindness" to murder the King. Their marriage, perhaps the most committed and solid of all Shakespeare's marriages, imitated life – with one spouse knowing the other's weaknesses so vividly that she could call upon spirits to make *her* more brutal in order to compensate for inadequacies only she could see. It wasn't a put down in Cusack's case – just pragmatism, knowing that without *her* "keen knife" Macbeth would be unable to fulfill his (and her) destiny. Yet, when Macbeth responded, "Bring forth men-children only," to her aggressive plan to kill Duncan, Cusack cut off Eccleston's speech, seeming to both laugh and cry into his shoulder. Here, Cusack's reaction paired with her thoughts about the role as an actor. She said in an interview, "The Macbeths are not monsters, they've just lost their children. They're wounded and damaged. Life B is to be King and Queen, as opposed to Life A, which was to be a couple with children who lived."[5] Too old to have more children, Cusack's Lady Macbeth made no comment about it to her husband, but allowed him to hold her as if he knew that at that moment he'd said exactly the *wrong* thing.

But undeterred, the Macbeths went on with their plan – Lady Macbeth playing hostess to Duncan, et al., in the balcony above, and Macbeth contemplating his dagger on the stage below. Here and throughout the play, the balcony served as a way to show simultaneity. The contrast between upper and lower levels commented upon what people see above the surface of events and the darkness hidden beneath them. Revealing that darkness is only a matter of time – and time became a crucial metaphor as Macbeth exited to kill Duncan. At that moment the man in the "waiting" area stood and started a digital clock, positioned exactly between the upper balcony and the lower stage, counting down two hours from the moment of Duncan's murder. With this clock, the theme of time was accentuated with a perversely ironic foreshadowing. Rather than not knowing "the day nor the hour," as Jesus asserts in Matthew 24:36, the audience knew both the day and hour, but not *what* the clock was counting down to when it started. The end of the play? The end of Macbeth's life? Then, when Duncan was dead, the mysterious time keeper rose again and wrote a hash mark on the brick wall with

Figure 3: Lady Macbeth (Niamh Cusack) and Porter (Michael Hodgson) in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of Macbeth. Photo by Richard Davenport, courtesy of the RSC.

chalk, signifying the first of many deaths caused by Macbeth's and his wife's ambitions. With each new murder, the man wrote another hash mark.

Finally, this man who had been sitting on stage the whole time, watching and listening to every interaction, had a role. He was the Porter. Unlike the played-for-laughs Porter of the 2016 Globe *Macbeth*, the RSC's Michael Hodgson played the Porter's role with deadly seriousness, as if he were a malignant puppet master pulling the strings of Macbeth's ambition. His only comic relief came when, later, he took the role of the third murderer. At that moment, he pulled a bag of crisps out of his jacket pocket and started to eat them, and when one of the other murderers snatched it away, Hodgson calmly put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a new bag of identical crisps. At every other moment, Hodgson's role was to inspire fear and a sense of surveillance, as if some evil, underworld devil were the real person in control Macbeth's fate. When pursuing Banquo and Fleance, the Porter directed the other murderers toward them to kill. Toward the end of the play, the Porter became Macbeth's servant, Seyton (pronounced Satan), and appeared to be very much like the devil walking abroad. Clearly on no one's side but his own, the Porter gestured with a tilt of his head and a clearing of his throat toward Macbeth when Macduff came to fight him. Prior to that, in Lady Macbeth's mad scene, it was the Porter, not the Gentlewoman who said, "She has spoke what she should not." His ubiquitous presence – cleaning up, eavesdropping, marking a hash on the wall for all the known and unknown murders committed offstage – made the Porter the ghastly chorus of the show. With the little witches flitting in

and out of the scene, they became his, not Hecate's, minions. In fact, the Hecate scene was cut entirely.

Fascinating touches, like the reframing of the Porter's role, supplemented the darker elements of the play overall, while imagery also added to the success of the thematic picture. Two men unrolled a red carpet for Macbeth's coronation over the blue stage as if a river of blood spilt forth from the Macbeths' murder and usurpation. Golden confetti celebrated Macbeth's rise to power, but also symbolized the ephemeral and fragmented nature of the golden crown he'd stolen. That golden confetti met its dark contrast with ash raining from the heavens whenever a ghost appeared and in the second Macbeth-witch meeting. Additionally, when Macbeth said, "Here's our chief guest," at the coronation, he addressed Fleance, not Banquo, and put the crown, jokingly, on the young boy's head. After a moment of smiling at the boy, Macbeth snatched the crown back, protectively returning it to his own insecure head. All of these details were made to be seen at once, which made the Upper Circle quite the "pleasant seat." It also made me wonder during the performance itself how any filmed version would be able to do this production justice.

Figure 4: Macbeth (Christopher Eccleston) and Lady Macbeth (Niamh Cusack) at the coronation with Fleance in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of Macbeth. Photo by Richard Davenport, courtesy of the RSC.

It couldn't. I saw the RSC Fathom event on July 24th, and the mise en scene of the filmed production strangled Findlay's concept and rendered the special effects impotent. Had one only viewed the filmed performance, it would be unclear that the Porter was always on stage and what his significance might be. It was impossible to see some of the more breathtaking effects. For instance, after the killing of Macduff's family, including his older son, his infant, and his very pregnant wife, Lady Macbeth found a tape recorder in the balcony with "They're coming to kill me, mother," recorded on it, documenting the slaughter. Somehow the illusion designers made it so that an infinite mirror appeared behind Cusack as she realized what this tape meant, clarifying that Lady Macbeth, who had previously used child killing as rhetorical device, went mad as a result of Macbeth's *actual* killing of a child (and his whole family). In the filmed production, the infinite mirror was impossible to see, but in the "cheap seats," live in the Upper Circle, the illusion was heart stopping. Using a flashlight during her mad scene, Lady Macbeth entered the audience, saying, "Take my hand," to an unsuspecting attendee. In a live production, audience infiltration made for a strong reaction – especially for those in the area being entered – but on film, it seemed silly. The only way to do this production justice on film – a consummation devoutly to be wished – would be to treat it *as a film*, just as the RSC did with the David Tennant and Patrick Stewart *Hamlet* of 2009. That said, Eccleston's performance made the film worth watching.

Particularly interesting in Eccleston's performance, and Findley's interpretation of the play, was Macbeth's final confrontation with Macduff. Macbeth fought Macduff barehanded, before finally landing two swords, his own and his rival's. After a brief pause, Macbeth, unexpectedly, handed over Macduff's sword to make it a fair fight. Ash fell once more from the heavens, and Macduff lost his sword again. They grappled hand-to-hand, with Macduff going down to the ground and Macbeth kicking him several times. When it was clear that *Macduff*, not *Macbeth*, had been defeated by all rights, Macbeth started to laugh bitterly. He had had it. In his last speech, "I will not yield…" Macbeth had held back the last word of his final sentence, but as Macduff rose from the ground to face the wrath of the tyrant, to whom he had *clearly* lost, Macbeth, instead, held out his sword to Macduff and completed his sentence. "Enough," Macbeth said, surrendering, despite having won. As the clock struck zero, Macduff took the offered sword and slit Macbeth's throat.

Macbeth's surrender is not in the text of the play, of course, but this moment was one of the more moving parts of the production. Findlay's decision to give Macbeth this brand of virtue at the end of the play, while giving Macduff multiple chances to best his opponent but failing, showed that despite Macbeth's ambition, despite his horror at his own deeds, despite losing his wife, deep down, he had some desire, however hidden, to have integrity. I'm not sure this approach would hold water with a less appealing Macbeth, but with Eccleston, it felt right. Even the word, "Enough," signified that he was done with this petty pace from day to day. He had simply been dressed in borrowed robes, after all, and for an unpretentious soldier like Eccleston's Macbeth, there was only so much "play acting as King" that he could endure.

With the death of Macbeth, Malcolm and the rest of the soldiers came on stage for the coronation. But then, above the scene, the little witches appeared in the balcony again. They glared down at the court, and in a clever twist, Fleance returned to the stage. As he walked to the front and center of the stage, the witches repeated their famous lines, "By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," and Fleance, not missing a beat, swung his sword up to rest on his shoulder. At that very moment, the clock reset to two hours. The implication was that as one cycle of corruption ended, another began. In ridding itself of a tyrant, Scotland had no brighter prospects. In fact, the future might be even worse.

It's tempting as an American to apply the RSC's bleak observation about the ubiquity of political corruption to our own gloomy government. After the unmistakable criticism of the political milieu within the 2017 RSC Roman season,[6] the RSC 2018 season's foray into *Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet,* and *The Duchess of Malfi* does not at first glance have as unified a lesson to teach. Yet, the thread that links together each of these 2018 plays is that, in today's culture, we believe we've evolved beyond these early modern conflicts and that they would not apply directly to our contemporary world. Our naive confidence mirrors Macbeth's, but like him, we're overly optimistic. There are plenty of people who have outsized ambitions. Some relationships are still forbidden. Many women are still inappropriately controlled by men. If anything, the RSC's 2018 season asks us to look at our world from the Upper Circle, rather than from the selective angle provided by screens, in order to see all these problems happening at once and to understand their global implications. Cruel are the times. When will *we* say, "Enough"?

Notes

1.The balcony was fitted with either a scrim or a two-way mirror (or both) in the front in order to create visual effects, which were used throughout the play.

2. Nine young ladies were cast as the witches with a revolving schedule. On May 16th, 2018, the witches were played by Taya Ashley-Timms, Harriet Murphy, and Betty McFarlane.

3. Alex Wood, "Niamh Cusack, 'I thought I'd missed my chance to play Lady Macbeth," 12 March 2018. *The Stage*, https://www.whatsonstage.com/stratford-upon-avon-theatre/news/niamh-cusack-macbeth-rsc-polly-findlay_46007.html. Accessed 7 August 2018.

4. Gareth McLean, "Christopher Eccleston: 'I gave Doctor Who a hit show and then they put me on a blacklist,'" *The Guardian*, 11 March 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/mar/11/christopher-eccleston-macbeths-very-insecure-about-his-masculinity-i-am-most-men-are Accessed 7 August 2018.

5. Wood, "Niamh Cusack."

6. See Marcia Eppich-Harris, "The Royal Shakespeare Company 's Roman Season: A Memento Mori for America," *Early Modern Culture* 13 (2018): 228-234.

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